ON TRIAL:
WHO IS YOUR KING?
March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 12:12–19
John 18–19 *(selected verses)*

"Look, the world has gone after him!"
John 12:9 (NRSV)

Holy God who hovers daily round us in fidelity and compassion,
this day we are mindful of another, dread-filled hovering,
that of the power of death before which we stand
thin and needful. . . .
So we come in our helpless candor this day . . .
remembering, giving thanks, celebrating . . .
but not for one instant unmindful of dangers too ominous
and powers too steady and threats well beyond us. . . .
It is in your power
and your promise that we take our stand this day.
We dare trust that Friday is never the last day,
so we watch for the new day of life.

Walter Brueggemann
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth

As your Son ignored warnings about his safety and came into the city,
so come to our hearts and souls and minds and wills this day.
Give us passion and love and courage to accept him,
to affirm, love, and follow him, our Lord and King. Amen.

There is a fine and fragile line between a crowd and a mob. Given the right conditions—fear is an important ingredient, as are resentment and a sense of powerlessness and victimization; add in a misplaced patriotism and paranoia and finally a little religion—anger becomes rage. And rage, like fire, feeds on itself, and a crowd becomes a mob, and people, in the heat of the moment, say things and do things they would never say or do individually. It's called mob psychology, and if there is someone manipulating it, stirring it up, it can quickly turn violent and murderous.

Right wing radio talk show hosts shout on the air, “We have to get rid of these people”—“these bastards,” Rush Limbaugh added. “Get rid of all of them.” “Don’t retreat; reload”—with a gun sight trained on the district of a United States senator. ”Socialist! Communist! Nazi!” And bricks start to fly through windows, and death threats and racial and homophobic epithets fly —all of which happened in our nation last week.

An angry crowd turning into a murderous mob is exactly what happened on a Friday morning 2,000 years ago in a public square in the city of Jerusalem in front of the Fortress Antonia, where the Roman governor had established temporary headquarters.

There was a prisoner, a rabbi from Nazareth (100 miles to the north), one of the quarter million pilgrims who had come to the city to observe the Passover. He was best known for teaching love and forgiveness, but savvy political operatives in the capital, using the language of religion, had convinced people that he was a threat to their values and their security, and so an angry crowd gathered outside the governor’s quarters and, whipped into an irrational frenzy, demanded that this rabbi be executed, screamed “Crucify him!” Fear and anger turned into rage; the crowd became a mob. The strongest politician in town, whose job was to keep order, made a difficult decision, and the prisoner was put to death. The politician’s name was Pontius Pilate. He is remembered in history only for the decision he made on that Friday 2,000 years ago.

But first there was the parade. Palm Sunday. A favorite Sunday around here, when our children process down the center aisle waving palm branches much as children and their parents did on the first day of that week long ago. Our Director of Resource Development asked this week if, in my sermon, I could point out how many children there are and how the number keeps increasing every year and maybe I could simply point out that we don’t have anything close to enough space for those children to have adequate classrooms, and could I please mention that we do have a venture, Project Second Century, and a capital funds campaign to build a new building to provide for all those beautiful children? So there it is. I have done my duty—almost the impossible: worked fund-raising into a Palm Sunday sermon.

Frances Taylor Gench, whose book *Encounters with Jesus* we have been using this Lent, says the parade Palm Sunday commemorates stands at the intersection between religion and politics. Fox Radio talk show host Glenn Beck, on March 2, called on Christians to leave their church if they hear the words *social justice.* "I beg you," Beck said, "look for the words *social justice* or *economic justice* on your church's website, and if you find them there, run away from your church. . . . Social justice, economic justice," Beck said, "are code words for socialism, communism, and Nazism. Am I advising people to leave their churches? Yes! If I'm going to Jeremiah Wright's church." Well, I'm not sure if any churches have emptied out in the last three weeks, and my guess is that more people than ever are crowding into Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side this morning to hear Jeremiah Wrights' successor, Otis Moss III, preach faithfully and passionately. But there is a sense in which Beck is absolutely right. It's not socialism, communism, or Nazism—a grade-schooler knows that—but it is about justice, and it's about a gospel that for 2,000 years has been challenging social structures, political and economic arrangements that work to the disadvantage of poor people and to the advantage of privileged, powerful people.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is one of the current Christian thinkers I read as much as I can. He teaches philosophic theology at Yale and recently wrote an essay for the *Christian Century* on the topic "How My Mind Has Changed." Wolterstorff explains his comfortable Calvinist–Dutch Reformed upbringing in Michigan, how he was taught that it was a Christian's duty to live a good life and do good things. And then he attended a theological conference in South Africa and saw firsthand institutional racism, political oppression. He heard South African officials explain how much charity they were doing for poor blacks, and he realized it wasn't enough, wasn't close to what the Bible mandates. What was needed was not charity, but justice; not new aid programs, but new laws.

Wolterstorff says his mind was changed from thinking that our Christian responsibility is to do charity to realizing it is to do justice, and that means social, political, institutional change. "To delete justice from the Bible is to have very little left."

Glenn Beck would surely have been among those who pled with Jesus not to come to the capital city at such a politically volatile moment, to stay away in

the safety of Galilee, a hundred miles from the messy politics, the economic and social policy of the capital.

The parade was provocative. Jesus' followers and disciples didn't want him to do it. He was staying with his friends Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus in Bethany, two miles outside of Jerusalem. On the first day of the week of the Passover, he decided to go to the city. Rumors about him were spreading throughout the thousands of pilgrims crowding the city: how he had healed the sick, how he taught with such integrity and eloquence and authority, how he had said, "Blessed are the meek, the peacemakers." There was even a rumor that he had raised a dead man back to life and the man, Lazarus of Bethany, would be with him when he came to the city.

And then Jesus insisted on riding into the city on a donkey, although he walked everywhere else. Everyone's favorite Bible verse was from the prophet Zechariah

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem.
> See, your king comes to you,
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Think about it: 250,000 pilgrims in a city whose permanent population is 40,000, there to celebrate Passover, to remember Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt. Think about it: a celebration of political freedom and independence in the capital city of a nation that is not free or independent but part of the Roman Empire, governed by Rome's appointed officials, occupied and controlled by Rome's army. That is the situation into which Jesus decides to ride in the very way the Bible says a king will come. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The Last Week,* say that it looks for all the world like a planned political demonstration.

The way the Gospel of John tells it, Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. The religious and political authorities have already decided that he is a troublemaker and now, after what he did on the first day of the week—riding into the city in the way the people's scripture said their king would come—that he is a dangerous political threat. They put together a plan to get rid of him, an arrest on trumped-up charges, a public show trial before

the governor and a crowd, now easily persuaded that he is a threat to their security

The Fourth Gospel describes the trial and the relationship between Jesus, the prisoner, and Pilate, the governor and judge, in detail. It's presented in seven separate episodes.

- Outside, on a balcony overlooking the crowded square: The crowd demands death.
- Inside: Pilate questions Jesus about kingship.
- Outside: Pilate announces that he has found Jesus, whom he calls King of the Jews, not guilty; he offers to free Jesus and execute another prisoner, Barabbas. The crowd demands Jesus' death.
- Inside: Pilate orders the soldiers to beat Jesus, has a purple robe placed on him and a crown of thorns.
- Outside: Pilate shows Jesus to the crowd and hopes for a little pity. The shouts are now screams: "Crucify him!" Pilate continues to shuttle back and forth between the mob and private conversations with Jesus. He tries to persuade Jesus to help himself. All Jesus needs to say is "I'm not a king. I never was, never will be," but Jesus won't do it. Pilate tries to persuade the crowd that Jesus is no threat. The mob will have nothing to do with it. "You are no friend of Caesar's if you free him," they shout.

One more effort—"Shall I crucify your king?"—followed by what Frances Taylor Gench says is the most devastating, most chilling sentence in the New Testament: "We have no king but Caesar." There you have it. A politician doing everything he can to preserve order, trying desperately and ultimately failing to remain neutral. People whipped into a rage out of their own fears; religious leaders so obsessed with their own privilege and the security of their institutions that they deny the very foundation of their faith and vow ultimate allegiance not to God, but to the emperor. Whenever I think about that, those religious officials selling out, denying their deepest convictions—"We have no king but Caesar"—I remember the devastating newsreel in the movie *Bonhoeffer*, showing German Lutheran bishops in their clerical collars, on the platform at Nuremberg, before a huge crowd, shaking hands with Adolf Hitler and raising their right arms in the Nazi salute.

And in the middle of all that, this one who alone seems to know exactly what he is doing, steadfast, strong, quietly defiant, standing there with the purple robe around him, crown of thorns, blood on his forehead—the King.

“Sometimes you have to decide who your king is,” Gench says. Sometimes life places you in a situation where you can’t remain undecided, safely neutral.

An obituary in the *New York Times* caught my eye recently—“Henri Salmide, 90, Dies: German’s Defiance Saved a French Port.” The article explained that Henri Salmide, a former German naval officer, serving in Bordeaux, France, in August 1944, was ordered to destroy the city’s port facilities and docks, among France’s most extensive. Salmide, like many others, knew that Germany was losing the war, took his life in his hands, and disobeyed orders. Instead he blew up a Nazi bunker, escaped, and joined the French underground. In an interview in 1977, he was asked why he did it. He said, “I acted according to my Christian conscience.”

Our choices may never be that dramatic, but in a hundred decisions we make every day—how to relate to others, what to think and do about issues that confront our society, how to spend money, what causes to support, whom to encourage, whom to oppose, whom to vote for—every day we decide who our Savior, our Lord, our King is.

We might wish that he had not come to the city, that intersection of religion and politics, but he did, and so he comes today.

The late Lord George MacLeod, House of Lords, Church of Scotland minister, founder of the Iona Community, said,

> I simply argue that the cross be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . . and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died, and that is what he died about. And that is where Christ’s people ought to be and what church people ought to be about.

And so yes, he comes in and through issues that challenge and vex us: how to spend our resources; military budgets and education budgets; health care and jobs and housing and immigration and juvenile justice and courts and prisons; halls of congress and state legislatures and city councils. Beck might wish Jesus would stay away, but Jesus doesn't. He rides into the city and there would be Lord and Savior and King.

During my first year in divinity school, I came upon a rough spot, a time of doubt and uncertainty. As is almost always the case, my personal faith was unexamined, simple, simplistic. You have to think and think hard in that academic environment, and to tell the truth, I did and began to wonder whether I had made a mistake.

It was Holy Week when it came to a head. I couldn't get my mind around the classic Christian formula that Jesus had to die to satisfy God's righteousness, was a substitute victim for the crucifixion we deserve. What kind of God would to that to a son? It appeared to me that Jesus was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, a helpless victim of everything that is wrong with the human condition.

One evening I was talking with a friend, Walter Phillips, an Australian Ph.D. student. He and his wife, Trish, were expecting their first child, Peter, who was born with Down Syndrome. So I was telling Walter how I wasn't at all sure of what I believed and how could anyone believe in and build a faith and a life on a man who simply got caught by big social, political forces and submitted, passively and weakly, to his fate?

Walter thought for a while and said, "You know there is another way to think about this: that Jesus wasn't a victim at all, but he did what he did intentionally for love."

Jesus' crucifixion is not so much what sinful people did to him, as it is what a loving God did and does for us. Read, carefully, how the Gospel of John tells it, Walter said.

It isn't the only reason I stayed and became a minister, but it is an important one: the crucifixion not so much a substitute for punishment that we, I, deserve, but a sign, an expression of God's love.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” the Gospel of John announces.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,” John announces.

And so I love the picture of Jesus that emerges from John’s account of Palm Sunday and the Passion.

He is not a victim, meekly submissive/ This Jesus is strong, steadfast, courageous, quietly defiant.

He will carry his own cross. He will walk steadily up that hill to his death. He will face his hour, his death, not in terror but in love—strong love for his friends, his people; strong love for God.

When it is over he will say, “It is finished. It is complete. All has been done.”

Crown him in your heart this day. Place around his shoulders your hope, your will, your love, your commitment.

He will die, as he lived—like a king, my king, your king.

All praise to him. Amen.